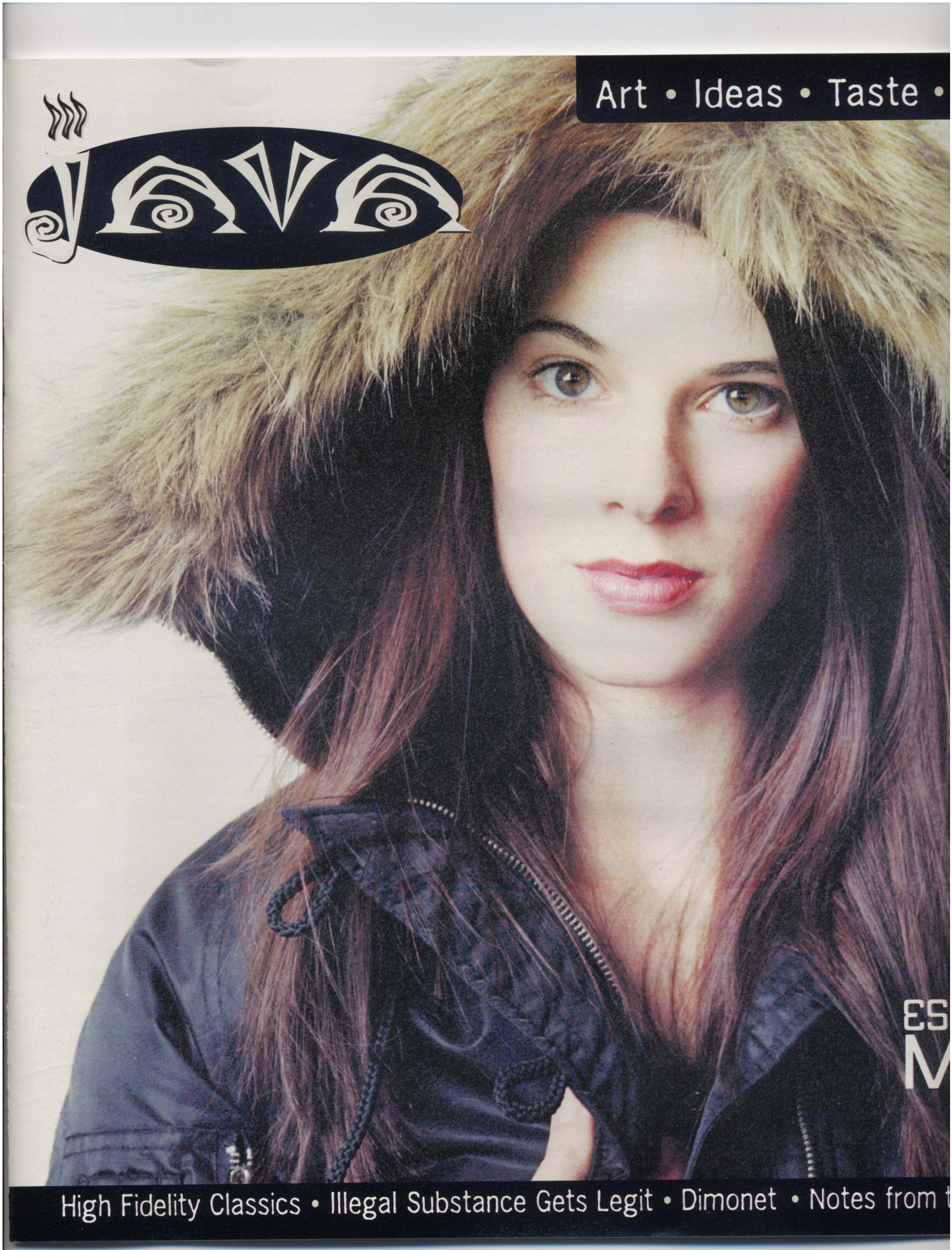
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ILLEGAL SUBSTANCE Gets Legit

A Conversation with MC Adverb

BY PHILLIP BLACK

Illegal Substance is on a mission. "I started the band to make music so dope and so addicting it's like a drug," says MC and leader Adverb. And plenty of people are starting to get hooked—the self-titled debut album by the Valley's hyperactive "electro hip hop" party band was given a glowing three-and-a-half star review in the December issue of *URB* magazine. Still, Adverb refuses to take it all too seriously. "We're cracker-ass, sucker MCs just trying to have fun with our music!" he laughs.

Illegal Substance enjoyed a breakout year in 2003. Their CD was issued on well-respected electronica label Moonshine Music and songs from it have been licensed and used on ESPN's "Sportscenter," MTV's "Real World—Paris," ABC cop show "10-8," and "Girls Gone Wild" infomercials. With all that exposure, the URB praise, and another review slated for the February issue of *Alternative Press* magazine, major record companies have started sniffing around. "We've been getting some calls from major labels, so that may be in our future," Adverb says. "When they're calling you, that's always a good sign."

The seeds of Illegal Substance's sound were sown in Adverb's youth in St. Louis, Missouri. "I grew up on hip hop and was always into that scene, breakdancing on cardboard in front of K-Mart when I was 8 years old, and old ladies were throwing money in my hat," he says. "I loved hip hop and everything about the culture, but then gangsta rap came along and hijacked it. That was cool at first, but it started getting ridiculous. It carried this stigma that everybody had to incorporate and be a thug."

"We'd go to these teen clubs from the time I was 13, and people used to show up in MC Hammer pants. Then they were showing up in Starter jackets and stealing their mom and dad's guns. They were suburban gangsters," Adverb says. "They weren't really gangsters, but people were getting shot! One night I was out at a teen club and this dude got shot four times in the face. I said, 'That's it. I'm done with this shit.'"

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He soon found a new scene to become involved in. "I was really depressed," Adverb says. "I worked at a clothing store in the mall. One day, I went to work and my friends were asking me what was wrong. I said that hip hop had all turned negative, and this lesbian chick says, 'I've got the perfect place for you—the rave scene. It's all about peace, love, unity, and respect.' She dragged me to a dirty warehouse, and I was hooked. I basically abandoned the hip hop ship and sought refuge in the rave world."

After finishing high school, Adverb left home and family to join a friend in the Valley. "I moved out to Phoenix and the rave scene really started popping off here," he says. "I found other people who had come from the hip hop scene because they didn't feel like it was worth dying for. After a huge influx of B-boys and B-girls (into the rave scene), other underground styles started flourishing like drum-n-bass and breakbeat, and breakdancing started coming back in. There was a merging of B-boys and ravers and the byproduct is what we call 'Electro Hip-Hop.' "

While he'd always wanted to become a star, Adverb now had a vision of a new style of music to get him there. He just needed a crew to help him do it. The first part was easy, he already knew DJ Jimi Numonic—a friend since

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fifth grade in St. Louis who had also relocated to Phoenix. "He moved out here a couple of years after I did, and he's been with me from the get-go," Adverb says.

Finding a co-MC wasn't as easy, but eventually Adverb and Numonic were introduced to P-Nut. "He was a friend of a friend of a friend," Adverb says. "So I went and met him and he was a cool cat and a good rapper." The trio played their first show together at Anderson's Fifth Estate in late 1999. Soon enough, Adverb hit on an attention-grabbing concept to get the band noticed.

"We'd put up on the marquees of the venues we were playing, 'Illegal Substance—Free Ecstasy.' It was just a take off on 'Free Beer' or whatever," he says. "Then we took Sweet-Tarts and put them in seals to give out at shows, and it started getting rumored around town that we were throwing ecstasy out into the crowd—like we could afford that at $25 a pop!"

Illegal Substance was released in July 2003. "We had still wanted to call the album *Free Ecstasy* but Moonshine urged us to drop it," Adverb says. "It was good that we did drop it because the record business moves at such a snail's pace. By the time the album was released, it was a played-out idea."

"Hollywood* is very stiff. *You play to people with their arms crossed. So we rented a donkey called Pickles to carry two hot chicks into the show,* but they *didn't get past the bouncers."

From there, the band decided to title the album they were working on *Free Ecstasy* as well, and Illegal Substance made up a sampler of tracks from it to stage an event. "We were going to have a *Free Ecstasy* sample give away at Swell Records, and we promoted the hell out of it," Adverb says.

The promotion was so effective that the government got wind of it. "The D.E.A. went on Fox News and publicly denounced us," Adverb says. "They said that if we ever played a show in Maricopa County, they were going to shut us down. Then the station had me come on as well, and I was doing my best to be witty. I think I made them look stupid.

"There were agents out there just snooping around, and it was the most absurd, ridiculous thing! We were just some jokers, and then we had the D.E.A. coming out for a CD giveaway?! It was like, 'Nice to know where my tax dollars are going.' What a joke!"

All that hype couldn't help but get the band noticed. "We achieved our agenda and then some because it helped us get signed," Adverb says. Illegal Substance's first record deal was with Offworld Records. "The label was run by this rich kid who made multi-millions in Internet porn," Adverb says. "Music was kind of his hobby, and he signed us. They were throwing money into marketing while we were still working on the album. He put full-page ads in *Alternative Press* and *URB*, and a back cover ad in *BPM*, and we didn't even have an album finished!"

The relationship with Offworld soon soured, but the band sold themselves successfully to Moonshine Music who bought them out of their contract. "Moonshine is like a pillar of the rave community, but they were telling us they wanted to use us as a bridge to the mainstream because we're the first band of this nature that they've signed," Adverb says. "It was funny because after we signed with an electronica label, they hired more of a rock producer (Danny Saber) to finish the album off and add a different flavor to it. I don't know what to call it now—electro-funk-hip-hop-punk-everything-and-the-kitchen-sink—but we pull it off!"

Unfortunately, the band feels Moonshine isn't giving the album the promotional push it deserves. "The irony is they put the album out and they're not spending any money to market it!" Adverb says. "At the first label, they were spending money to work an album that wasn't even out. Now we've got a product and great distribution on a recognizable label, and they're not doing any marketing. It's very frustrating."

Adverb believes he knows what the label's strategy is. "Moonshine is making their money back on licensing the songs," he says. "Instead of putting a big push behind it, they're waiting for a major to come along and buy us off the label." Not that that would be a bad thing. "This is too good of a project to squander, so it's probably time for us to move to a major," Adverb says.

With album in hand, the Illegal Substance trio put together a group of musicians to recreate its sound live. It consists of bassist White Chongo, drummer The Invisible Man, guitarist Pawn Shop Billy, and hype man Wren. Apart from Valley shows, the group has also played in Southern California. They're also still causing trouble and were banned from the Viper Room last fall. "Hollywood is very stiff," Adverb says. "You play to people with their arms crossed. So we rented a donkey called Pickles to carry two hot chicks into the show, but they didn't get past the bouncers. They didn't even appreciate it. So to compensate for that, I stage-dived into the drum set—which was the club's backline set—and they were like 'Get out! You'll never play here again!'"

The donkey comes from their CD's artwork and has special meaning for the band. "We put a jackass on the cover of the album because we're jackasses and if you take it seriously then you're the jackass," Adverb says. "That's our schtick. We're not cool, so we wear it as a badge of honor."

Illegal Substance will showcase for major labels—representatives of Warner Bros., Jive, Island and Tommy Boy are expected—in an all-ages show at the Big Fish Pub at 8 p.m. Jan. 30. Sharing the bill are the Bombshelter DJs, Arvin's Garden, Antidote, DJ Slip-e. The event will be hosted by DJ Earth of Power 92. Cover: $7.